

NSC

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THE PICTURE IN INDOCHINA

The initial thrust of the Viet Minh's winter offensive, that brought its force to Thakhek on the Mekong River in Central Laos, appears completed.

The forces involved consisted of elements of two divisions, the 304th and 325th and are believed to total about nine battalions or 7,000 men.

French units have moved south from Thakhek 50 miles to Savannakhet and reinforcements are being flown to that point to meet any further Viet Minh move southward. The forces now grouped at Savannakhet total about eight battalions, and should be able to hold off a Viet Minh strike there. The Viet Minh strength in central Laos and nearby in Annam does not appear large enough for a drive up the Mekong to the capital at Vientiane or further northward to Xieng Kouang, a large French military post. This force may well remain in the Thakhek region astride French surface communications along the Mekong River, which supplied 20 percent of French needs in north Laos, while the Viet Minh develops a much heavier offensive elsewhere.

The major threat to Laos is still posed by four enemy divisions located in Tonkin, all or part of which could quickly move into northern Laos and eventually overrun this area.

NSA review completed

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1. airfields
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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] They are so located that they could not only move into Laos, but could also be employed further to consolidate the enemy hold on northwest Tonkin, or to attack the delta.

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[REDACTED] Further depletion of their delta reserves, which have already been weakened by the transfer of 12 battalions to Dien Bien Phu, would dangerously expose this vital region. Similarly, French forces in South Vietnam cannot be removed without a resurgence of the enemy threat there.

There is little prospect that the Viet Minh forces at Thakhek will at this time attempt to cross the Mekong into Thailand. In any case, the Thais are capable of meeting such a move. The state of emergency declared by Bangkok on 26 December was a precautionary measure intended primarily to screen the refugees crossing the Mekong. The assertion in ISVESTIA on 26 December that Thailand was being used as a base for American supply to the "puppet" government of Indochina was probably intended to disrupt Thailand's close cooperation with American policy in the area. During the Viet Minh invasion of Laos last spring, Thailand permitted French supplies to move through its territory.

Aside from the military advantage to be gained by a dispersion of French forces, Viet Minh penetration of Laos gains them considerable prestige in the eyes of the Indochinese

Put Thai forces on map

peoples on both sides of the conflict. If all of northern Laos can be taken it can be built up for future drives against Cambodia and South Vietnam. Any campaign against the former would be described as a "national liberation movement" as in the case of Laos. There are an estimated 1,000 Viet Minh regulars and several thousand auxiliaries operating in Cambodia; in South Vietnam the enemy has 8,000 regulars and 32,000 irregulars.

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The best available information indicates about 240,000 Chinese Communist troops in south China with 50,000 of these along the Indochina border. No threatening movement or preparations by any of these forces has been reliably reported.

The Prime Minister of Laos has appealed to the free world for support in helping Laos to resist aggression. The Laotian government, as well as Thailand, was prepared to appeal the

Viet Minh's invasion of last spring to the UN, but objections by the French forestalled such action. The French embassy in Washington has just stated that Paris continues to oppose any appeal to the UN either by itself or any other country.

It is possible that any major Viet Minh campaign now would be connected with the Ho Chi Minh peace feeler on 29 November and subsequent Orbit emphasis on the desirability of negotiations. Such military pressure would be designed to force France to negotiate as well as to put the Viet Minh in a better position in the event of any negotiations. Ho Chi Minh's statement on 27 December ordering his army "to destroy the enemy" does not necessarily indicate a lack of willingness to negotiate. It was quite possibly intended to underscore to the French and Vietnamese peoples the desirability of peace. It may be the forerunner of a heavy attack from Tonkin to capture northern Laos and further incline Paris and Saigon toward negotiations. Northern Laos would be difficult for the French to defend against such a Viet Minh offensive.

Heretofore, it has been felt that the benefits gained by the Orbit from the continuing drain on France of the war in Indochina outweigh in Communist eyes the advantages of a peace. Recent Orbit propaganda calling for negotiations, however, might indicate that the Communists now believe peace would be so advantageous to the Viet Minh and would so importantly improve their position to take over Southeast Asia that they are willing to forego a continuation of the war.